

6/10/04 This is the third draft of the chapter on Shorthanded Common Mistakes in Hold'em Brain by King Yao. Please email feedback, suggestions, comments, opinions, questions to [KingYao@HoldemBrain.com](mailto:KingYao@HoldemBrain.com) or you could use the Feedback Form to email me at the bottom of the page.

## **Hold'em Brain: Shorthanded Common Mistakes**

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#### **Common Mistakes in Shorthanded Hold'em**

Players often have misconceived ideas about playing in shorthanded Hold'em games. Some players play the same way in shorthanded games as they would in full games. If they are playing correctly in full games, then sticking with the same strategy when playing in shorthanded games would be a mistake. Although playing more hands in shorthanded games is correct, many players will adjust too radically and play too many hands, especially in early position and in the small blind. In shorthanded games, players should also play more aggressively, but this concept should be applied strategically instead of generally. Here are some common mistakes committed by players in shorthanded Hold'em.

#### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #1: Playing too many hands in the wrong spots**

Many players think they need to play more hands in shorthanded games. This is true, but the key is to play more hands more aggressively in the right spots. Here are some situations where some players mistakenly believe they can loosen up in shorthanded games. Instead, hands in these spots should be played similarly to full game situations.

1. Under the gun with KTo in a 6-handed game. Some players believe they can raise here, but it would be too loose and too aggressive. The fact is that many players will re-raise you with hands such as AJo, ATo, 77, KQo, KJs. Your KTo would not play well against those re-raising hands. You can open-raise with KTo in a later position since there will be a lesser chance that another player has a hand worthy of re-raising you.
2. Calling a raise in the small blind with JTo. This is too loose. This is discussed in fuller detail in Shorthanded Common Mistake #11.
3. Calling a raise on the button with A3o. Normally calling raises is a bad strategy in shorthanded games, except in the big blind. But calling a raise with a hand such as A3o is an especially poor decision. The first problem is that it will often be dominated by any other hand with an A (which many players will open-raise with in shorthanded games). The second problem is that even if there are no other A's in the other player's hands, when an A comes on the Flop, A3o will not get a lot of action.

#### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #2: Throwing away too many hands away in shorthanded games**

Players who are new to shorthanded games sometimes play the shorthanded games in the same manner that they play in the full games. This is too tight. Here are hands that are playable in shorthanded games but may not be in full games.

1. You should call a raise with QTo in the big blind against an early position raiser in a 5 handed

game or less. In full games, QTo will often be dominated by an early position raiser. But not so in shorthanded games since players are usually raising with more hands.

2. You should be re-raising on the button with AJo against an early position raiser in a 6-handed game. In full games, an early position raiser often means a hand stronger than AJo. In fact, it would be correct to fold AQo against a tight early position raiser. But the players in shorthanded games are more aggressive and will open-raise with a wider variety of hands. Your AJo has a good chance of dominating the original raiser.

### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #3: Being too predictable**

In any poker game, you would prefer to be unpredictable to your opponents, and have your opponents be predictable to you. When there are 9 or 10 players at the table, sometimes this is tough to control, because play unpredictably often means playing sub-optimally, especially when in early position. In shorthanded games, there are more chances to be unpredictable and still play correctly. But there are two specific seat positions where you still have to play predictably pre-Flop.

The first position is the under the gun position in a 5-handed (or less) game. You should play predictably in this position. There are still two more non-blind hands yet to act, so there is a good chance at least one of them has a quality hand. When they do play the hand, they will not be afraid to re-raise you in shorthanded games. This is similar to raising in an early position in full games.

You cannot raise too often from this position nor can you raise without quality cards. Being unpredictable in this spot will cost too much because it would mean playing too many hands in a bad position.

The second position is in the small blind. When there is a raise, the small blind should either re-raise or fold most of the time (see Shorthanded Common Mistake #11). The small blind is in such a bad position that if he plays too unpredictably, it will mean playing too many hands. Playing too many hands from the worst position on the table would cost more than unpredictability may gain.

The other seat positions can gain more from playing unpredictably in shorthanded games.

- The big blind can call a raise with more hands in shorthanded games than in full games. This means he will be more unpredictable after the Flop. If there is only one raise, and everyone else folds to the big blind, the big blind can choose to re-raise or just call. He can mix it up with hands such as AK, AQ and pocket pairs.
- The button can raise with more hands since it will be folded to him more often than in full games. The button can raise more often especially if the small blind is playing correctly and folding often. Also if the big blind is too passive after the Flop or folds too often pre-Flop, then the button can raise with more hands.

The problems of being too predictable extends to post-Flop play as well. Here is a situation when you are in early position and you can make the same play with many different hands, thus being less predictable to your opponents.

Flop: J♥7♠6♠

Here are some hands you should consider check-raising with:

- ◆ any hand with a J, such as JT, J8
- ◆ any hand with a 7, such as A7, 75
- ◆ any straight draw, such as T8, 98
- ◆ any flush draw, such as K♠3♠

Check-raising with any of these hands will make your play much less predictable to your opponents. If he was raising pre-Flop with a hand such as A5 or KT, he will have a tough time calling you even though he may be ahead. If he does call on the Flop, he may fold to a bet on the Turn if he does not improve.

Another situation occurs when you have a flush draw, a straight draw or top pair on the Flop and are in late position. You should be raising with any of those hands so that your opponent will not have a good handle on the way you play.

#### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #4: Calling when you should be folding or raising**

Habitually limping in the pre-Flop round in shorthanded games is a strategy for losers. That is a strong statement, but it is true. If it is a 5-handed game and you are under the gun with a hand that you are not sure how to play, you should either fold it or raise it. There are not many hands that you should limp with in an early position in full games. That small number of hands gets reduced in shorthanded games. Some of the hands that players have trouble with in this situation are: A3o, JTo, 87s. I see players often limping in with these hands in early position. Their thought process goes something like this: "I have seen other players raising with these hands and winning so that means it's a playable hand. But these cards are not that great, I really need to hit the Flop in order to keep playing with them. The cards are too good to fold and they are not good enough to raise with, so I'll just call."

Let's take a look at T9s. Limping in early position with this drawing hand may be justifiable in full games if you expect others to call as well, thus making it a multiple player pot. In shorthanded games, usually what will happen is that someone will raise behind, or they will all fold to the blinds. In either scenario, the hand will be played with few players, and you will not have correct pot odds to be playing. This is a hand that should be folded. A raise is incorrect because the hand is not strong enough. A call is incorrect because you cannot expect to get into a multiple player pot.

Let's take a look at ATo. ATo is not a great hand and can be dominated by AK, AQ and AJ. However, it is strong enough to play when the game is 6-handed or less. ATo is best played with as few players as possible since it is not a drawing hand. This means raising is better than calling.

#### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #5: Folding too often**

Tight players who wait for the right hand often have an advantage in full games. They are able to fold their mediocre blind hands to early position raisers, they have the ability to throw away QQ

when there is an A on board and a solid player bets, they can see when a player may have hit a flush draw and fold their top pair. All of these abilities are useful in full games. They are useful in the shorthanded games as well, but the circumstances are not the same. Adjustment is the key word, and sometimes the tighter players in the full game cannot adjust correctly. In shorthanded games, you cannot throw away medium to high pocket pairs without a good reason. Just one or even two overcards on the board are not a good reason in itself.

Example 1:

You are in the big blind in a 4-handed game..

Your hand: T8o

The button open raises and the small blind folds. Do not automatically fold this hand as many may in full games. It is very possible you are behind, but if you play well post-Flop, you are getting enough pot odds to at least see the Flop. If you were up against a hand such as Q7 (which many players will raise with on the button in shorthanded games), you are pretty much in a breakeven situation or close enough that it is worth 3.5 to 1 to make the call. In shorthanded games, players often feel they can raise with any two cards on the button. The same concept can extend to hands such as K4s when the cutoff raises.

Example 2:

You are in early position and hold a pair of J's in a 5 player game. You raise pre-Flop. An average player on the button calls as does another player in the big blind. The player in the big blind seems to be comfortable in shorthanded games.

Your hand: J♦J♠

Flop: A♣T♠7♥

The big blind checks to you and you bet. The button folds and the big blind calls.

Turn: 3♥

The button checks and you bet. All of a sudden the big blind check raises you. It would be incorrect to automatically assume you are up against an Ace here and fold. In fact, you could easily be up against a hand like J♥T♥ who picked up a flush draw along with his middle pair of T's. There are many players who do not have the creativity to make this play, but there are many who can, especially in the shorthanded games. Your decision to play on or to fold is dependent upon your opinion of the aggressiveness and the trickiness of this player. Keep in mind that players tend to play more aggressive in shorthanded games, so there are more reasons to call in this spot in shorthanded games than in full games.

### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #6: Being too passive in the wrong spots**

Shorthanded play calls for playing more aggressively because the average hand here is not as strong as the average hand in full games since there are fewer players. This means some hands get bumped up in relative value, and can be played more aggressively in the shorthanded games. Here are some reasons for playing aggressively.

1. You want to get more money in the pot if you have a good hand so you can win more. Since players are looser and more aggressive in shorthanded games, it means many players have learned to call bets and raises with lesser holdings. So you should not be afraid to be betting or raising when you have the best hand, since your opponents are more likely to stick around in shorthanded games. This means you should tend to avoid slowplaying since you will get paid off more often in shorthanded games.

2. You have a good hand, but it is vulnerable. You would be happy if your opponents folded in this situation. For example, if you have top pair when the board is T-8-3, you may have the best hand, but your hand is vulnerable to overcards. You need to charge overcards a fee to see if they can draw out on you.

3. You need the other players to fear your raises so you have credibility when you are bluffing or semi-bluffing. This credibility is important because you will have more chances to bluff and semi-bluff in shorthanded games. You need to make it so that your opponent cannot deduce whether or not you have a made hand. When your opponents are uncertain of our hand, it can easily lead them to make mistakes.

Example:

You hold A3o on the button in a 4-handed game. You open-raise and both blind hands call.

Your hand: A3o

Flop: A-7-6 rainbow

They both check and you bet. Both of them call.

Turn: 8

They both check again. At this point it is important not to be afraid of a check-raise by one of the players and keep on betting. You do not want to allow a lone 5 or 9 to see if they can make a straight on the River for free. Although you are not all that happy being up against a hand like 98 (a pair of 8's with a straight draw would give him 13 outs against your pair of A's), it would not be a good idea to allow a hand like that to see the River without putting in a bet, thus getting "infinite" odds (when you do not have to put in any bets and yet have a chance to win the pot). This situation is different from that of checking on the Turn with the intention of calling a bluff bet on the River.

There are so many possible outs that your opponent can have. The strategy of inducing bluffs is best deployed when your opponent has fewer outs and he would likely fold if you bet on the Turn.

In those cases, your check on the Turn is a ploy to lure him into betting a worse hand on the River after you had shown weakness on the Turn. This is not the case in this example. Here, most opponents with a straight draw will call. The looser players may call with an inside straight draw (with just a T or a 4) as well. So you want to bet on the Turn since you are likely to get called.

### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #7: Being too aggressive in the wrong spots**

The strategy of semi-bluffing is a powerful one when it is used at a proper time and against the

right opponent. The proper times are times when there is a scary board for your opponent. The right opponent means a player who is willing to fold at least once in a while with a made hand when you raise. If there is no chance that your opponent will fold, then a semi-bluff is a poor strategy. Many players in shorthanded games have learned to play aggressively, and typically this is the correct strategy against normal players. But there are some players who will not lay down a hand. They are willing to call even with A-high or bottom pair, no matter how scary the board is. Against these calling stations, semi-bluffing or bluffing is a self-defeating strategy since the opponent will not fold a better hand than the bettor's. You should still be aggressive against calling stations, but it should be at times when you think you are ahead and should bet for value. Although the mistake of being too aggressive against a calling station can also be made in full games as well, it is listed as a common mistake in shorthanded games because players tend to semi-bluff more often in shorthanded games. Thus you could make the mistake of semi-bluffing against calling stations more often in shorthanded games than in full games.

### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #8: Not using the option of Checking**

Many decisions in poker boil down to raising or folding. Using the extreme strategies of raising or folding is often a correct decision, but the act of checking can be a useful weapon too. It becomes even more useful in shorthanded games when other players may be playing too aggressively. There will be situations where neither folding nor raising is the best play, but a check or call is. In these situations, a fold may be incorrect because you may have the best hand. Meanwhile, a raise may be incorrect because if you do have the best hand, you do not want to drive out the other player with a raise when he is sure to bet into you again on the next round with the worst hand. Here's an example.

Example 1:

You hold KJ and open raise in the cutoff in a 5-handed game. The button folds, but both blinds call.

Your hand: KJ

Flop: A-K-4 rainbow

Both blinds check to you and you bet. The small blind folds and the big blind calls. Since the big blind called, you note that he could have an A with a bad kicker, QJ or JT for an inside straight draw, or a K with a worse kicker than you.

Turn: 6

The big blind checks. There are now 4 big bets in the pot. If the big blind is on a straight draw with a hand like QJ, then he only has 4 outs. If you bet and he calls, you know that he would be making a bad call since he does not have pot odds. There are some players that will automatically call with just an inside straight draw even without pot odds (they may not actually realize they do not have pot odds). Against those calling stations, you should bet again to get his bet in. However, there are other opponents that would now be willing to dump their straight draw on the Turn since they know they do not have enough outs to make a call worthwhile. Against a player who is willing to fold in this spot, it is now correct to check on the Turn after his check. You want to give him an opportunity to think he can win the hand even if he does not hit his straight on the River.

By showing him weakness with the check on the Turn, you have said to him that you do not have a strong hand and that you may be willing to fold on the River if he bets. Meanwhile if you had bet on the Turn, he would just fold. Thus if he does not have an A and does not hit his straight, you have a good chance of inducing him to bluff on the River and win a bet that you would not have won if you had bet on the Turn.

Now consider the situation when your opponent has an A with a good kicker. Maybe his hand is A6 and made two pair on the Turn. When he hit his two pair, he is no longer worried about his kicker problems. Maybe he actually flopped two pair or a pair of A's with a decent kicker. In any of those cases, he knows there is a good chance that you will bet on the Turn after raising pre-Flop and betting on the Flop. Many players will now set you up for a check-raise on the Turn. If your opponent has one of these hands, you do not want to bet and get check-raised, because you would be forced to fold your own hand (a correct play at that point). Instead, you would much rather check and hope that you give him a bad beat on the River with trip K's.

If your opponent has very little, your check may win an extra bet if he bluffs on the River. Whereas if you had bet on the Turn, he would have folded. If your opponent is way ahead of you, then your check has given you a chance to catch up on the River. Compare this to betting against a better hand - you are likely to get check-raised on the Turn and be forced to fold without seeing the River. Checking should be part of your arsenal, used as a stealth weapon against solid players who can steal if they see weakness. Do not use it against calling stations as you may be preventing them from calling when you have the best hand (against those players, lean towards betting on the Turn and checking on the River). The players that are super aggressive in shorthanded games, and keep betting until someone raises them, will miss out on terrific opportunities in hands like this.

### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #9: Calling all the way to the river with just A-high on a tough board**

Sometimes it is correct to call down an opponent with just A-high, but sometimes it is not. Some players who are not used to shorthanded poker take an A and play it until the river indiscriminately.

There are occasions when this is the right play, but there are occasions when it is not. They see so many poor quality hands win, and see some A-high hands win, that they automatically think they should call down to the River with any A without regard to the board or the actions from the other players.

Here are a couple of examples where calling down with an Ace high may be incorrect.

Example 1:

Your hand: A6

Board: K-Q-9 [turn] 8 [river] 3

There really is no reason for you to assume the other player is bluffing. Trying to call him down on a bluff with a board like this will quickly dwindle your stack. In fact, you should not even have bothered to call on the Flop.

Example 2:

You are in the big blind, and there are two other players.

Your hand: A6

Board: 3-4-5 [turn] K [river] J

There are two other players, the small blind and the button. The small blind checks to you on the River and you check as well. The button bets and the small blind calls. This is a must fold. The only way you can hope to win this hand is in the unlikely case that the button made a bluff bet and at the same time the small blind actually called with a hand that cannot beat A6. That would be very unlikely. Maybe you could have beat a bluff from the button, but you cannot beat the call from the small blind.

Here are a couple of examples where calling down with an Ace high may be correct.

Example 1:

Your hand: A6o

Board: 3-4-5 [turn] T [river] 8

It is a 5-handed game. Your opponent is on the cutoff and raised pre-Flop. When the board has no high cards, your opponent is less likely to have a pair than on a board that contains some high cards. Also, it was correct for you to be in the hand on the Flop or the Turn since you had a straight draw and an A, although you could have chosen to have put in a raise on the Flop or Turn. The main question is whether your opponent would try to make a value bet with AK or AQ on the River. If he held a hand like KQ, K9, QJ, he may keep on betting hoping you fold an A. A call may be correct against aggressive opponents.

Example 2:

Your hand: A♠6♠

Board: 9♠9♣5♠ [turn] T♦ [river] T♥

There was a late position pre-Flop raiser and you called in the big blind with A♠6♠. This is not a tough decision to call. You are beat only if your opponent has a 9, a T or a pair of J's or higher. You are tied if he has just an A, and you win the hand if he doesn't have any of those cards. You would beat a hand that was a pair lower than 9's, such as 88 or 77. You will lose your fair share of hands in this situation, but you will split the pot or win the pot outright often enough to make it worthwhile to call on the River against most opponents.

### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #10: Calling too often**

In shorthanded games you will often get raised, semi-bluffed, check-raised and bluffed. There are situations where it is right to call them down for two reasons. The first is that you may have the best hand. The second is that you want to make them aware that you will not easily fold and will call their semi-bluffs. This is so that they will think it is not worthwhile to semi-bluff against you.

However, there are many situations when it is right to fold because the chance of you having the best hand at the moment, combined with the chances that you may fall behind at some point, are too high. Here are a couple of examples.

Example 1: When you should fold to a raise from a player in late position



You raised before the Flop from the cutoff in a 5-handed game with A♠6♠. An average player cold calls you on the button as does the big blind.

Your hand: A♠6♠

Flop: K♣Q♦4♥

The big blind checks, and you bet hoping to win the pot. The player on the button raises and the big blind calls. This is an easy decision to fold. It should be fairly obvious that the possible hands that the two players have are a pair of K's, a pair of Q's or a straight draw. Given that there are two players who are in, it is unlikely that both of them are on a draw. Even if that were the case, in order for you to feel more comfortable with your hand, you would have to hit an A on the Turn. However, an A would complete a straight if one of them had JT, a hand that many players will play. So when two players are in on the Flop, it is a clear fold at this point, even though the pot is offering you 11:1 odds. The pot is not big enough to call.

Example 2: When you should fold to a bet on the Flop after getting re-raised pre-Flop

You are the button and try to steal the blinds against two weak players by open-raising with J♠9♠. A solid player in the small blind re-raises. The big blind folds and you call to see the Flop.

Your hand: J♠9♠

Flop: A♣3♦3♠

The small blind bets out. It is time to fold, even though you are getting 8:1 odds. You could be drawing dead, and at best you are drawing to 6 outs. That is not enough to keep playing.

Example 3: When you should fold to a bet on the Flop when you were the raiser pre-Flop

You are in the cutoff holding K♠J♥ and open-raise. Both blinds call.

Your hand: K♠J♥

Flop: A♣9♦9♣

The small blind bets and the big blind calls. Now you have to fold. The best scenario you can hope for is that they are both on club flush draws, which seems unlikely. You are likely beat right now in at least one spot and if you are not, you can still easily get outdrawn. If there was only one opponent in the hand, you may consider calling if he is prone to betting out on paired Flops as a bluff or bet out on a flush draw, but with two opponents, a fold would be correct.

### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #11: Frequently calling raises in the small blind**

Calling raises in the small blind is a mistake when there is a raise and no other callers before the small blind has to act. When there is just one raiser, the small blind's decision should usually be a binary one, re-raise or fold. The first and main reason the small blind should only re-raise or fold is due to its relative position compared to the big blind. If the small blind only calls, then he is allowing the big blind 5:1 pot odds to call. That means the big blind is not making a mistake by calling with almost any hand. By calling, the small blind will be in a horrible position for the rest of the hand, with two players behind him. With this large disadvantage, the small blind should be

folding many hands, including hands such as J9s, A2s and KTo. With playable hands, the small blind should be re-raising. A re-raise by the small blind would only give the big blind 7:2 pot odds to call, which will force him to fold most of the time. The second reason is that a re-raise will make the small blind look strong going into the Flop. This is useful when the button was on a steal, since a re-raise pre-Flop and a bet on the Flop will often force the button to fold. With premium hands such as AA and KK, a re-raise is correct too. If the big blind calls, he will be making a big mistake, of which you will be the primary beneficiary with your premium hand.

You should not call raises often in the small blind if there is only one raiser and no other callers yet.

If you see players habitually calling in spots like this, you know you have an opponent who is giving away a lot of edge to the big blind. Try to move your seat to this player's left (see the 3 player game in the Shorthanded Overview chapter for more on this concept). If there are more than one player in the game who habitually calls raises in the small blind, then the game is even better. It does not matter as much where you sit in that case as you will be getting the best of it often.

### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #12: Not adjusting to the tempo/mood of the game**

Shorthanded games have different styles. Sometimes they will play much like full games. This can happen when most of the players are taking it easy, trying to play solidly, and no one is trying to be a bully too often. The players may in fact be mostly used to full games, so as a group, they are not as aggressive as most shorthanded players can be. However, there are other times when the game will play much faster, with many raises and re-raises. In these wilder games, it is not rare to see half of the pre-Flop rounds being three bet by one of the players. This means the pot will get big even before the Flop, so raising and semi-bluffing in the later rounds becomes a more important strategy. A fold by any of the players will add equity to any of the remaining players. In a slower tempo game with a more passive mood, semi-bluffs will need to work at a higher rate for them to have value since the pots will typically be smaller.

Generally, when the tempo of the game is faster and the mood is aggressive, semi-bluffing and raising are more useful strategies because the pots will be bigger. When the tempo is slower and the mood is passive, the correct strategy is generally to play more conservatively (of course you can still selectively steal). Some great players have an ability to mold the tempo and the mood of the game in the direction they want. For example, if they want a faster tempo, they may try to trash talk the players they think are susceptible to being manipulated, get them on tilt, and all of a sudden, the game is played faster and more aggressively. It is important to adjust to the tempo and the mood of the game, and useful to control and manipulate it.

### **Shorthanded Common Mistake #13: Playing 3-handed games the same way as 6-handed games**

Shorthanded games come in different sizes. 6-handed games will play differently than a 4-handed or 3-handed games. In fact, 6-handed games play more like 9-handed games than it does 3-handed games. There are more similarities between 6-handed games and 9-handed games than 6-handed games and 3-handed games. Not only is there a positional difference in the games (the under the gun player is also the button on the same hand in 3-handed games), but every player is in essence involved in every hand. This means any weakness by any of the players is extremely magnified if one of the other players is skilled enough to take advantage of it. It also means any player can win

big or lose big due to good or bad luck.